

# Parents' Attitudes toward the English Education Policy in Taiwan

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Taiwan, like many other countries in Asia, introduced considerable changes in English education policy in response to the need for English communication in the global market. During the process of implementing the new English education policy, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Taiwan encountered several problems. Although researchers have examined other issues concerning the implementation of the English education policy, such as the shortage of trained English teaching personnel, the selection of textbooks and the difficulty of teaching a class of heterogeneous learners, parental attitudes toward or expectations for the English education policy itself remain unexplored. Parental opinions about English education and the extent to which parents support English education reform play a large role in the success of the implementation of the policy and are important factors for the government to consider when shaping future education policies. The perspectives of parents, therefore, should be included in a research-based examination. This study surveyed the opinions of Taiwanese parents on current English education policy and practice.

Key words: English education policy, parents' attitudes, Taiwan

## Introduction

The English language has been considered a global language for decades. Since English is a "global language" (Crystal, 2003), and widely used in science and commerce, the number of English language learners has increased tremendously worldwide. Crystal (2003) estimated that "the ratio of native to non-native speakers is around 1:3" (p. 69). People in Taiwan, of course, are not immune to "English fever" (Krashen, 2003). Taiwan, like many other countries in Asia, has introduced considerable changes in English education policy in response to the need for communicative

ability in English in the global market (Butler, 2004). During the process of implementing the new English education policy, the Ministry of Education (MOE) of Taiwan encountered several problems. One was that very few parents have followed the timeline of English education set by the central government, which indicates that there is a mismatch between parental expectation/need and the current English education policy.

Parental opinions about English education and the extent to which parents support English education reform have a great impact on the success of the implementation of the policy since parents play a key role in their children's English education. Parental views concerning when their children should start learning English, who should teach their children English, how English should be taught, and what role English should play in their children's lives will inevitably affect their decision on the types of school in which their children are enrolled. School administrators

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chose to meet parents' needs/expectations at the expense of the government's English education policy in order to increase the enrollment rate. Parents' expectations may also foster the establishment of other types of language institutions such as Chinese-English bilingual schools or cram schools if the public schools cannot offer the type of English education they want for their children. Seen in this light, the mismatch between parental expectations/needs and government policy can be attributed to policy implementation failure. The perspectives of parents are important factors for the government to consider when shaping future education policies. Therefore, these factors should be included in a research-based examination. If parental opinion is taken into consideration, the likelihood of meeting the needs of both students and parents in planning and implementing the policy will increase.

Research concerning Taiwanese parental attitudes toward or expectations for English education policy, however, remains scant. Most studies have examined other issues concerning the implementation of the new English education policy, such as the shortage of trained English teaching personnel (e.g., Dai, 1998; Shih, 2001; Chang, 2002), the selection of textbooks (e.g., Chen, 1998; Chang, 2004); and the difficulty of teaching a class of heterogeneous learners (e.g., Chiu, 2002). To date, only one study has investigated Taiwanese parent's opinions on the foreign language they prefer that their children learn, the age at which children should begin learning English, the effects of learning English on the children's mother tongue and culture, and the employment of foreign teachers of English in elementary and junior high schools (Oladejo, 2006). The results showed that English was the foreign language favored by the majority of the parent participants (95%). Of these participants, 32.7% preferred that their children begin learning English at kindergarten. Over 50% of the parents disagreed with the view that learning English negatively affects the children's native language and culture acquisition. Of the participants, 40.4% agreed with the idea of recruiting foreign teachers of English to teach in elementary and junior high schools.

While Oladejo's (2006) study has certainly provided insights into Taiwanese parents' attitudes toward the new English education policy, the 6-question survey employed for data collection only revealed parents' opinions in relation to a few aspects of the new English education policy.

Parents' views on other aspects of the new English education policy, such as the textbook policy and teaching personnel, remain unexplored. In addition, Oladejo's (2006) study only surveyed parent's opinions of the policy. The extent to which the parents actually support the policy (i.e., the effect of the policy on the parents) was not investigated in his study. This study attempts to bridge the gap by surveying the attitudes of Taiwanese parents toward current English education policy and the effect of the policy on parents and students.

### **The New English Education Policy in Taiwan**

The significance of English has actually been acknowledged since 1945 in the early foreign language education policy in Taiwan, which mandated that English be taught as a required subject from middle school onward (Taga, 1976). Students were required to study English for 7 years (i.e., 3 years in middle school, 3 years in high school and 1 year of Freshman English in college). Recently, calls for better communicative abilities in English in response to globalization and the need to provide equal opportunities for students to receive quality English education brought about a radical change in the English education policy in Taiwan. The scope of this English educational reform includes changes in 1) teaching objectives and methods, 2) teaching materials and 3) the grade level at which students start learning English.

English education in Taiwan, with the exception of minor changes in weekly teaching hours, did not vary much for several decades, in terms of the English teaching objectives and methods, until the recent implementation of the new English educational policy (Tse, 1987; Tsao, 1999; Chen, 2003). The emphasis of the previous English education policy was on developing reading and writing skills for academic or other specific purposes while the current educational reform (the 9-year curriculum educational reform) stresses the importance of cultivating communicative competence (i.e., primarily oral and listening skills but not neglecting reading and writing skills) (Ministry of Education, Republic of China, 2002, 2003). Another major change in the current English education policy lies in the decision to open the textbook market to any publishing firm which produces its own textbook as

opposed to the previous policy of a single textbook for each grade level published solely by the government. The government provides guidelines for textbook writers and has specialists who evaluate the textbooks before allowing their publication. In addition to the changes in the teaching objectives, methods and materials, the new educational policy altered the beginning of English education from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade in middle school to the 5<sup>th</sup> grade in elementary school in the 2001 academic year and to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 2005.

### **Elementary English Teachers in Taiwan**

Since the teaching of English had not previously been included in the elementary school curriculum, the shortage of trained English teaching personnel was another major problem that the government and school administrators encountered at the initial stage of implementing the new English education policy. In an attempt to solve the problem, the MOE held a nationwide exam to recruit perspective teachers and subsequently provided teacher training for those who passed the exam. In addition, the MOE approved the establishment of departments at several teachers colleges to train English teachers to become certified to teach in elementary schools. Moreover, the government recruited a number of foreign teachers to assist with English instruction at the elementary school level. Consequently, the problem of the shortage of English teachers at the elementary school level is being alleviated. Given the fact that the background of public school and cram school English teachers in Taiwan varies and differences between native and nonnative teachers have been documented (e.g., Medgyes, 1994; Chen, 2005; Chung, 2006), parents' concerns about these issues and what their preferences are when they have choices warrant investigation.

### **The Debate about Making English an Official Language of Taiwan**

Aside from the change in English education policy, the recognition of the significance of English was revealed in the attempt by the government to make English one of the official languages of Taiwan. The then Premier Yu

announced the proposal to make English one of the official languages of Taiwan within 6 to 10 years (*United Daily*, 2002). His proposals, inevitably, provoked debate among politicians. The then Taipei City mayor, Ma, Ying-chiu, for example, argued against the idea of making English one of the official languages of Taiwan. He claimed that it was inappropriate and unnecessary since Taiwan is not a colony of any English-speaking country (*Epochtimes*, 2003). Language policy and language education policy go hand in hand and have a great impact on the lives of ordinary people. Their voice, however, often remains unheard. As aforementioned, the current English educational reform changes the beginning year of English education from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, expands the number of textbooks from one for each grade level published by the government to multiple versions available from various publishing firms, and allows for teaching personnel from diverse backgrounds. The focus of the present study was on the opinions of Taiwanese parents regarding the year at which English education should begin, the textbook policy and the background of teaching personnel. The research questions included:

- 1) To what extent do Taiwanese parents support the new English education policy?
- 2) What attitudes do Taiwanese parents have toward the new English education policy and English language learning?
- 3) Do parents with different educational levels have different opinions about English education policy and English language learning?

## **Methods**

### ***Description of the Questionnaire***

Data for this study were collected through a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items, which were divided into three categories. The first part of the survey (i.e., items 1-3) was designed to elicit information on respondents' primary language spoken at home and the highest level of education that the father and mother had completed. The second part of the survey (items 4-10; 29-30) was designed to determine the extent to which parents support the new English education policy. Parental

support of the new English education policy was examined in terms of the age at which the respondents' children began learning English, and whether their children attend cram schools to learn English after school, their perception of the importance of learning English and the time they spent helping their children learn English. The third part of the survey (items 11-28) was designed to ascertain parents' views on English education policy in Taiwan. This category was designed to examine Taiwanese parents' opinions about the appropriate age for children to begin learning English, the textbook policy, the preferred background of teaching personnel and the role of English in Taiwan. The survey was written in Chinese. It was pre-tested and revised once in order to make it as clear as possible.

### *Participants and Questionnaire Administration*

Questionnaires were distributed to second-grade students in sampled elementary schools in four cities in Taiwan. The reason why the survey was administered to parents of second graders was that the selection of participants whose children are one year younger than 3<sup>rd</sup> graders enables us to obtain a better picture of how well the policy serves the people's needs. Since the educational reform mandates that English education should begin at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, if the vast majority of 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students start learning English before entering 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, it indicates that the government's language education policy does not serve

the people's needs. Students were requested to take the questionnaire home for one of their parents to fill out. Parents were given a week to complete the questionnaire and then have their children return it to the teachers. A total of 489 surveys were collected.

Most of the surveys, as shown in Table 1, were filled out by mothers (72.9%); 27.1% were done by fathers. Over one-third of the respondents (38.7%) reported using both Mandarin and Taiwanese as primary languages at home. The percentage of those using Mandarin as the primary language at home was 34.1%, and those using Taiwanese was 31.3%. With regard to the highest level of education, over 80% of the students' parents (father and mother alike) had a high school or college level education. Those who had a junior high school education or less consisted of around 16% of the respondents.

## **Results**

### *Parental Support for the New English Education Policy*

Table 2 presents the parental views on the importance of learning English. As reflected in Table 2, 94.7% of the respondents considered learning English important. Table 3 shows the grade level at which respondents' children started to learn English. As can be seen in Table 3, all of the respondents' children were learning English at the time of

Table 1

*General Information on the Background of the Respondents*

Who filled out the survey?		Mother (72.9%); Father (27.1%)	
Primary language spoken at home		Mandarin (34.1%)	
		Taiwanese (31.3%)	
		Both Mandarin and Taiwanese (38.7%)	
		Hakka (1.2%)	
The highest level of education	Level	Mother	Father
	Elementary	2.9	2.3
	Jr. High	13.3	13.3
	High School	52.3	44.1
	University/College	27.6	35.1
	Graduate School	4.1	5.1

data collection (i.e., 2<sup>nd</sup> grade) and none of them waited until the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade to start as mandated by the central government. Over two-thirds of the respondents (67.3%) even enrolled their children in English class starting at the kindergarten level. The findings that 86.7% of the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students were learning English at school reveal a disparity between the

central government policy, which mandates that English be taught starting at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and parents' needs/expectations, as reflected in Table 4. With regard to the issue of whether students attend cram schools to learn English, as seen in Table 4, among respondents, 41.3% percent indicated that their children attend cram schools to

Table 2

*Parental Views on the Importance of Learning English*

	very important	important	neutral	not so important	not important at all
How important is it to learn English?	52.8	41.9	2.9	1.5	1

Table 3

*Grade Level at which Children Started to Learn English*

Age	N	%
Kindergarten 1	105	21.5
Kindergarten 2	112	22.9
Kindergarten 3	112	22.9
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	96	19.6
2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	64	13.1
Total	489	100

Table 4

*Current Practice of English Education Policy*

Questions	Yes	No
Does the school currently offer English classes for 2 <sup>nd</sup> graders?	86.7%	13.3%
Are your children currently attending cram school to learn English?	41.3%	58.7%

Table 5

*Reasons Why Parents Enrolled their Children in Cram School to Learn English*

Reasons	%
1. The English teaching personnel in cram schools are better than those in primary school.	8.1
2. The cram school provides more abundant and interesting materials than the primary school.	30.2
3. Attending cram schools allows students to begin learning earlier so that they can perform better at school.	12.2
4. We hope that children can get a head start on learning English.	19.4
5. We are worried that children may fall behind in school if they do not attend cram school.	20.3
6. It can't hurt to study more.	52.3
7. Both parents have to work and so neither one has time to help children with their homework.	15.3

learn English. When asked the reason why they enrolled their children in cram school to learn English even though English classes were offered at primary school, the majority (52.3%) chose the response “it can’t hurt to study more,” as shown in Table 5. Among the respondents, 30.2% thought that the cram school provides more abundant and interesting materials than the primary school. Over one-third (31.6%) enrolled their children in cram school to learn English in the hope that they would perform better at school. While the importance of learning English was certainly recognized by parents, the percentage of respondents who indicated they knew about the educational background of their children’s English teacher was relatively low (i.e., 12.9% for English teachers at primary school; 31.7% for English teachers at cram school), as shown in Table 6. In addition, over two-thirds of the respondents (65.9%) indicated they seldom or never help their children study English, while 34% reported they help their children study English very often or every day, as shown in Table 7. When asked to estimate the total number of English learning aids, including books, tapes, and CDs that they bought for their children, over half of them (53.9%) said they purchased less than 10 items.

#### *Parental Attitudes toward the New English Education Policy*

Table 8 shows parental perspectives on English education policy in Taiwan. As can be seen in Table 8, the

majority (70.6%) disagreed with the notion that the implementation of the new English education policy reduces the need for students to attend cram school to learn English. On the contrary, as 73.7% of the respondents pointed out, the implementation of the new English education policy compels parents to enroll their children in cram school at a younger age. In addition to their concerns about increased financial pressure on themselves and academic pressure on their children with the implementation of the new English education policy, 83.6% of respondents were concerned that the inconsistency among primary schools in the starting grade level for teaching children English would disrupt the curriculum continuity in junior high school. Of the respondents, 95.7% agreed that the MOE should ensure that primary schools begin teaching English at the same grade level. With respect to the starting grade level for teaching English at primary school, over 80% of the respondents thought it should be earlier than the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Concerning the issue of English textbooks, 89.9% of the respondents agreed that English textbooks for primary school students should be uniform in content. With regard to the parents’ expectations about their children’s English achievement, 96% of the respondents hoped that their children’s command of English could be as good as that of Mandarin (their mother tongue). Of the respondents, 78.9% thought that English classes in primary school should be taught in English only; and 57.3% thought the policy of hiring native

Table 6

*Parents’ Knowledge of the Educational Background of English Teachers at Primary School or Cram School*

Questions	Yes	No
Do you know what kind of educational background your children’s primary school English teacher has?	12.9%	87.1%
Do you know what kind of educational background your children’s English cram school teacher(s) has/have?	31.7%	68.3%

Table 7

*Parental Involvement in Children’s English Study*

Questions	Never	Seldom	Often	Every day
How often do you help your children study English?	9.1	56.8	30.7	3.3

  

Questions	Fewer than 10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	More than 60
How many English learning aids have you bought for your children?	53.9	19.3	9.9	4.5	1.5	3.2	7.5

speakers of English to teach English at primary school would help their children learn English.

Parents' opinions on the most appropriate grade level at which children should start learning English at school are presented in Table 9. As can be seen in Table 9, the percentage of the respondents who favored having their children begin learning English at kindergarten was over 40% (41.3%). Of the respondents, 29% favored the 1<sup>st</sup> grade as the starting grade level for teaching English. Less than 13% of the respondents considered it appropriate to start teaching English at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Over half of the respondents (56.7%) agreed that the number of students attending cram school would decrease dramatically if the government could implement English education beginning at the 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

Concerning the qualification of English teachers, as seen in Table 10, 57.9% of the respondents favored Taiwanese teachers with a solid English educational background. On the other hand, 46.2% regarded native

speakers of English with a bachelor's degree or higher in English literature or English education to be the best

Table 9  
*Parents' Opinions on the Most Appropriate Grade Level at which Students Should Start Learning English at Primary School*

Year	%
Kindergarten 1	17.7
Kindergarten 2	9
Kindergarten 3	14.6
1 <sup>st</sup> grade	29
2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	7.3
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	12.7
4 <sup>th</sup> grade	2.9
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	4.4
6 <sup>th</sup> grade	0.6
7 <sup>th</sup> grade (junior high)	1.7

Table 8  
*Parental Perspectives on English Education Policy in Taiwan*

Statements	1	2	3	4	M	SD
1.The implementation of the English-in-elementary-school policy eliminates the need for children to attend cram school.	16.4	54.2	24	5.4	2.18	.77
2.The implementation of the English-in-elementary-school policy compels parents to enroll their children in cram school so they can start learning English at a younger age.	5.6	20.7	56.1	17.6	2.86	.77
3.The inconsistency among primary schools in the starting grade level for teaching children English will disrupt the curriculum continuity in junior high school.	2.3	14.1	53	30.6	3.12	.72
4.The Ministry of Education should ensure that primary schools begin teaching English at the same grade level.	1.9	2.5	42.9	52.8	3.47	.64
5. The starting grade level for teaching English should be earlier than the 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade.	4	10	44.2	41.9	3.24	.79
6.The number of students attending cram school will decrease dramatically if the government can implement English education beginning at the 1 <sup>st</sup> grade.	9.1	34.2	41.4	15.3	2.63	.85
7. English textbooks for primary school students should be uniform in content.	2.7	7.4	46.7	43.2	3.30	.72
8. English classes in primary school should be taught in English only.	2.7	18.4	50.1	28.8	3.05	.76
9. I hope my children's command of English can be as good as that of their mother tongue.	2.1	1.9	50.2	45.8	3.40	.63
10. The policy of hiring native speakers of English to teach English at primary school will help children learn English.	9.6	33.1	41.9	15.4	2.63	.86

Note. 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree

qualified teachers. Regarding the background of foreign teachers, more than half of the respondents (52.7%) considered it was important to know the nationality of the foreign teachers at primary school or cram school, as shown in Table 11. Over two-thirds (70.3%) claimed to be able to recognize the differences among American, British and Australian English. However, the percentage of respondents who indicated they could actually explain the differences among the English varieties was 43.9%. Table 12 presents the respondents' perceptions concerning the differences among the varieties of English. Of the respondents, 39.7% indicated they were able to identify the differences in accent or pronunciation among the English varieties, and 1.4% claimed they could identify differences in grammar. Four respondents maintained that each English variety belongs to

a different linguistic family. With regard to parental preference in foreign teachers, the vast majority of the respondents (76.9%) preferred Americans, followed by Canadians (71.8%), British (34.2%), and Australians (2.1%), as reflected in Table 13.

As the popularity of learning English has increased in Taiwan, the language use of the younger generation has changed. As shown in Table 14, 52.6% of the respondent's children use a mixture of English and Chinese in their daily communication. Nearly 70% of the respondents (68.5%) felt happy about the code-mixing phenomenon in their children's language use. Table 14 also presents parental attitudes about making English one of the official languages of Taiwan. As seen in Table 14, over half of the respondents (53.5%) thought that English should be one of the official

Table 10

*Parents' Opinions on the Best Qualified English Teacher*

Qualification	%
Taiwanese teachers with solid English educational background	57.9
Taiwanese teachers with a bachelor's degree in any field	2.1
Native speakers of English with a bachelor's degree or higher in English literature or English education	46.2
Native speakers of English, irrespective of educational background	4

Table 11

*Parents' Views on the Nationality of Foreign Teachers*

Questions	Yes	No
Do you think it is important to know the nationality of the foreign teacher who teaches your children English at primary school or cram school?	52.7	47.3
Based on your understanding, are there any differences among American English, British English and Australian English?	70.3	29.7

Table 12

*Parents' Views on the Differences between the Varieties of English*

Reasons	%
Accent or pronunciation	39.7
Grammar	1.4
Belong to different linguistic family	0.8

Table 13

*Parental Preference in Foreign Teachers (based on nationality)*

Nationality	%
American	76.9
Canadian	71.8
British	34.2
Australian	2.1
South African	0



languages of Taiwan. The reasons why parents supported or opposed the idea of making English one of the official languages of Taiwan are presented in Tables 15 and 16. Those who supported the idea believe that designating English as one of Taiwan's official languages will help improve Taiwan's standing in the global market. Those who opposed the idea are concerned about the loss of national identity, and the burden their children may have to bear in learning an extra language. Interestingly, 9% of those who opposed the idea of making English an official language of Taiwan consider it is unfair because they do not think that everyone should be expected to speak English.

### ***Educational Levels and Attitudes***

This section presents the findings on how parents with different educational levels view English language learning and policy. To examine the difference in parents' views on English language learning and policy, a Chi-square test was

performed. The results indicated that parents with different educational levels were quite consistent in their answers to most of the survey questions except for the concern about the nationality of foreign teachers at primary school or cram school, the understanding of the difference among English varieties and the involvement in children's English study.

Table 17 presents the differences in levels of concern about the nationality of native speaking teachers among parents with different educational levels. The results indicated that the respondents with higher educational levels tended to be more concerned about the nationality of native speaking teachers than the respondents with lower educational levels ( $\chi^2=28.795$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The parents' educational level was a factor which influenced the understanding of differences in English varieties. As shown in Table 18, the number of respondents with higher educational level who claimed to recognize the difference in English varieties was greater than that of the respondents with lower educational level ( $\chi^2=28.127$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The

Table 14

*Parents' Opinions on Language Policy and Language Use*

Questions	Yes	No
Do you agree that English should be one of the official languages of Taiwan?	53.5	46.3
In everyday communication, do your children use a mixture of English and Chinese?	52.6	47.4
Are you happy that your children use a mixture of English and Chinese in daily communication?	68.5	31.5

Table 15

*Reasons why Parents Want English to be One of the Official Languages of Taiwan*

Reasons	%
To globalize Taiwan	46.9
To increase international trade opportunities	17.8

Table 16

*Reasons Why Parents Do Not want English to be One of the Official Languages of Taiwan*

Reasons	%
No need	1
Need to maintain national pride and identity	7
Not everyone should be expected to speak English	9
Puts the pressure of learning another language on their children	2

Table 17

*Differences in Concern about the Nationality of Native Speaking Teachers among Parents with Different Educational Levels (in frequency)*

Educational level	Concern about the nationality		No	Yes	Total
Elementary			8	0	8
Junior high school			38	20	58
High school			89	93	182
College/University/Graduate school			61	112	173
Total			196	225	421

 $p < .01$ 

Table 18

*Differences in the Understanding of English Varieties among Parents with Different Educational Levels (in frequency)*

Educational level	Understanding of varieties of English		No	Yes	Total
Elementary			5	2	7
Junior high school			25	29	54
High school			63	114	177
College/University/Graduate school			30	141	171
Total			123	286	409

 $p < .01$ 

Table 19

*Differences in Parental Involvement in Children's English Study among Parents with Different Educational Levels (in frequency)*

Educational level	Involvement				Total
	Never	Seldom	Often	Every day	
Elementary	2	7	1	0	10
Junior high school	14	34	8	3	59
High school	17	123	47	5	192
College/University/Graduate school	5	80	81	8	174
Total	38	244	137	16	435

 $p < .000$ 

results also showed that parents with higher educational level spent more time helping their children study English than those with lower educational level ( $\chi^2=66.391$ ,  $p < .000$ ), as reflected in Table 19.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated the effects of the new English education policy on parents and surveyed parental attitudes toward the new English education policy in Taiwan. The results showed that the majority of the respondents expected

their children to start English education at a younger age, consistency in the grade level at which children begin English education across the country; and a unified textbook policy, which run contrary to the current policy. The finding that over two-thirds of the respondents enrolled their children in English classes at the kindergarten level indicated the new English education policy in effect is actually powerless to regulate the age at which English education should begin in the country. The mismatch between when parents begin English education for their children and what is regulated in the policy can bring about the waste of educational resources and create problems for teachers when facing a class of heterogeneous learners.

There are several possible reasons for parents' unwillingness to follow the timeline of English education as set by the government. First, the adoption of the "decentralized planning" model in implementing the English education policy results in inconsistency among primary schools in the starting grade level for English education among cities or within cities and brings about "inequality of educational opportunities between students of different school districts," as Chen (2003) observed, which increases the anxiety levels of parents', causing them to worry that their children might fall behind in learning English, especially when their children are in a school which begins English instruction later than other schools. Therefore, the only solution that parents have found to ease their worries is to set their own timeline of English education for their children, which usually means having their children start learning English at a younger age. The finding that the majority of the respondents (95.7%) agreed that the MOE should ensure that primary schools begin teaching English at the same grade level indicated the need for the government to re-evaluate the approach used to implement the policy. A comparison study exploring the effect of adopting a "centralized" model in implementing the English education policy, as in Korea (Butler, 2004), and a "decentralized" model, as in Taiwan, is needed in order to provide insights for reshaping the policy.

Parents' preference for early introduction of English language learning, which was also documented in Oladejo (2006), and may be influenced by "the earlier, the better" myth about learning a language (i.e., Liaw, 1998; Chen, 2005). Since the significance of the communicative ability in the English language for future academic and career

success is widely recognized by the majority of Taiwanese parents, parents believe an early start will bring about better learning results. Several researchers, however, tried to dispel the myth and caution that the teaching of English at the preschool level may negatively affect children's mother tongue acquisition (i.e., Chen, 2002; Chang, 2007).

The findings show that the majority of parents have high expectations for their children's achievement in English proficiency, and yet very few of the respondents reported that they help their children study English, which means that they rely on primary or cram school teachers to achieve this goal. While parents placed great emphasis on learning English, few of them knew much about who was teaching their children English. Parents' ignorance about the foreign teachers' qualifications may have given rise to the belief, reported by Oladejo (2006), that "in general, the most important qualification for employment as a native English teacher in Taiwan is the color of the skin" (p. 152). The reason why parents seldom inquire about teacher's educational backgrounds may in part be that they trust or respect the school or language center to hire qualified teachers and may in part be their lack of ability to judge the quality of teachers. The government needs to inform the public about the concept of teacher qualification so that parents will be empowered to make the right choice when selecting an after-school language program.

Parents' expectations about the uniformity of the textbooks, which runs contrary to the current policy, suggests a need for education authorities to re-evaluate the policy. While the many approved textbooks available in the market were produced under the same guidelines provided by the government, the content of textbooks varies in many ways. For example, Chang (2004) compared four approved English textbooks and found that the textbooks in use varied in the total number of vocabulary items covered, sentence patterns introduced and themes included, which presented a challenge to both teachers and students. With such variation, teachers need to have further training in order to appropriately evaluate and select textbooks. Students, on the other hand, must shoulder the extra burden of having to study several textbooks from different publishers in order to prepare for exams.

Contrasted with Oladejo's (2006) observation that "it is an open secret that most parents prefer foreign English language teachers to their local counterparts" (p. 152), the

result of the present study showed that parents' opinions on the best qualified teacher were divided. Of the respondents, 57.9% favored Taiwanese teachers with solid English educational background, whereas 46.2% preferred native speakers of English with a bachelor's degree or higher in English literature or English education, which indicates that when given a choice to select a qualified teacher, parents consider the concept of professionalism is more relevant than the concept of native or nonnative "speaker". Concerning the nationality of the foreign English teacher, the respondents did have a preference for Americans when given the choice to select native speaking teachers. The preference for American English as opposed to other varieties of English may be attributable to the close relations between the United States and Taiwan, the Republic of China, which have brought about greater familiarity with the American model (Tse, 1987).

The findings that nearly 80% of respondents thought that English classes in primary school should be taught in English only pose a great challenge to the non-native English teacher. As Butler has reported (2004), regarding the issue of English teachers' proficiency in Korea, Taiwan and Japan, NNS elementary English teachers in Taiwan rated their productive skills significantly lower than their receptive skills. The issue concerning what language should be used in elementary English class warrants further investigation because it is important to have a better understanding of how well the parents' needs have been met.

In a similar way to Chen's (2002) finding about which young learners used English-Chinese hybrid languages, the results of the present study also showed that over half of the respondent's children (52.6%) mix English with Chinese in their daily communication. It is interesting to note that 68.5% of the respondents feel happy about the code-switching phenomenon in their children's language use. Whether the common Mandarin-English mixing phenomenon signals the success of English education or indicates the deterioration of mother tongue use warrants further investigation. Mandarin Chinese used to be the only language-related subject in the elementary school curriculum. Ever since local languages and English instruction became part of the official primary school curriculum, the amount of time allocated for Mandarin Chinese instruction has decreased. The last thing parents want to see is the

promotion of the English language at the expense of Mandarin Chinese. To achieve "balanced bilingual" proficiency, however, requires parents' persistence in guiding and monitoring children's use of both languages. What seems to be critical at the moment, therefore, is to educate parents about types of bilingualism and to help them develop an accurate perception of "good" bilingual language use so that they can guide their children's language use.

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